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# No Future: Punk, Design and Resistance to Dystopian Technologies

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# No Future: Punk, Design and Resistance to Dystopian Technologies

**by**

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**Report**

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# Dedication

For Scarlet and Nico, who inherit a future more uncertain—but perhaps more full of possibility—than I did.

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# Abstract

## No Future: Punk, Design and Resistance to Dystopian Technologies

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Smartphones and other compact forms of technology have become commonplace in the human experience throughout the world: at the same time, we have come to take for granted the necessity to access such technologies almost exclusively through privately-owned and corporate platforms. In this, the heyday of technology capitalism, which sustains itself with pernicious forms of data annexation and behavior surveillance, the notion of 'counterculture' has become a nebulous—and contested—idea, both within the current multiplicities of online discourse and as a reflection of changing attitudes in the twenty-first century to pre-existing notions of 'mainstream' and 'alternative' culture.

Drawing on my experience as a musician in the 2000s and 2010s, and the 'punk' inspirations that led me to music in the first place, this thesis is an exploration of the possibilities for countercultural responses to hegemonic technologies, and an attempt to update punk in satirical and rhetorical forms to confront the design assumptions that entrench logics of capitalism and fallacious technological 'progress'.

Keywords: Punk, Technology, Future, Design, Counterculture, Critical Design, Data, Progress, Resistance, Surveillance Capitalism, Data Capitalism, Information Capitalism, Speculative Design.

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# INTRODUCTION: TECHNOLOGY, HEGEMONY, AND LOGICS OF RESPONSE

At a time in which it is now commonplace to carry around an extremely powerful pocket-sized computing device with us wherever we go, the word 'technology' is subject to many associations and definitions. For me, the term is shorthand not just for the technological artifacts and environments of our daily lives—the hand-held and household 'smart' devices and social media platforms they are reliant on—but also, just as importantly, for the corporations that produce and monetize them, and the values they represent. Such technologies aren't merely tools of convenience and connection: they have become as integral to us as conduits and vehicles of our cultural behavior and human interaction as they are to our relationship with political institutions, monetary systems, and logics of belief.

Entering a Design MFA program in the fall of 2017, I felt I was in a unique position to assess and evaluate the changing impact of technology from a particular perspective within the creative professions, having spent most of the previous fifteen years working as a professional musician, and witnessing dramatic and radical changes occur in the industry and culture of music listening. During the time that social media was first intervening in the traditional artist-audience relationship in the shape of Myspace, formats of listening were already changing: it was becoming increasingly normal to encounter music in virtual, instant formats whose access required nothing more than an internet-enabled device. Around the time I first released a record as a signed recording artist in 2004, file-sharing already represented a watershed moment in the internet's dissolution of barriers between listener and music. In downloading a program like Napster, it was easier than ever to trawl the internet for music—downloading and

duplicating an artist's entire back catalog at the click of the button—without ever entering into any kind of financial transaction. Technologies of access and sharing had effectively made music free for the listener almost overnight: a dramatic tool of convenience for the user, with dramatic impacts for creators.

We continue to live through a rapidly shifting culture of change throughout the design, media and creative professions, and indeed in society itself, in no little part because of the continuing impact of such technologies of access and automation. The smartphone, which relies heavily on corporate gatekeepers of access like Google, Amazon, and Microsoft, has become a ubiquitous, near-permanent fixture in human experience throughout the world. The aim of my studies has been to further understand and analyze the biases, politics, and ethics that are embodied and engineered by these omnipresent technologies, and, more importantly, the people and companies that produce them.

As a focus for my MFA studies, I wanted to utilize the discursive tools that had inspired me and manifested during my time as a musician and spin them anew within the practices and theories of design. In the 1980s and 1990s, when I was first discovering music as a form of cultural and political expression, it appeared to me as one of the most powerful avenues of creativity available, a form that could be both popular and confrontational at the same time. The emancipatory potential of music was embodied for me in the intentions and methods of punk, a form of aggressive, contrary musical anti-populism which has been viewed both as a radical overturning of mainstream values and a contrary "identity crisis" in youth culture in the late twentieth century (Hebdige, 68). Whichever it is, punk—in its evolving forms through the 1990s and beyond, in such musical genres as post-punk, alternative rock, hardcore and riot grrrl—was formative in my development as a musician: I wanted to discover if its irreverent, anti-establishment

logic could be brought to bear on the field of design—conduit as it is between an imagined idea of the future and the future that comes to pass—to suggest a confrontational, truly countercultural response to hegemonic technologies.

In other words, I wanted to see if, in the face of the truly entrenched, mono-cultural vision of technology as fundamentally underpinning of the status quo, I could channel the spirit of punk to forge an alternative vision for the technologies of the present and future.

# PROBLEM AREAS

## The Context: Weighing the Benefits of Technology in an Age of Monopoly Platforms

Much as it is difficult to evoke one simple definition of technology, it is equally hard to point one's finger at discrete manifestations of technology and in each instance make a simple case for a failure or problem it represents. By its very nature, technology represents the collective results of vastly differing ambitions for social, financial and scientific innovation. However, there are a number of areas it's possible to identify as problematic: areas in which proponents and determinists of technology confuse technology with 'progress'—by insisting that we must pursue technological innovation at any cost, without analyzing or pushing back against the systems of belief that bring it about.

There's no doubt that the internet, and smart devices in their turn, have radically transformed society, improving our ability to communicate, easing daily frictions and solving problems in various areas of life. Social media technologies are enormously successful because they offer us genuine channels of access to each other and into communities of engagement—even to civic and democratic processes. But an increasingly passive reliance on technological solutions brings its own set of dangers. For both users and designers, it's more important than ever to employ critical and tactical tools to confront technology's inbuilt biases, if we are to ever highlight and confront technology's role in wider economic inequality and social division.

At the same time that the internet was forming into a powerful tool of connectivity and agency, it was coincidentally being corralled by a small number of corporate entities into a system of highly profitable monopolies, whereby more and more of the information and creativity that flowed into it was captured and appropriated by private actors to leverage the interests, consumer needs, and concerns of its users. On the internet, the exchange of ideas and information has become an explicit transaction: personal data becomes the price, personal agency the cost.

While companies as ubiquitous as the social media giant Facebook, and search-engine turned media behemoth Google, pay lip-service to notions of radical individualism and decentralized organizing, in many cases they serve to entrench social divisions, reinforcing the corporate and plutocratic influence in society. The collective power of data that could belong to us all in shared networks of connectivity are in most cases owned and operated by a handful of billionaire monopoly businesses, which leads to a state of information oligarchy.

As I will argue, platforms of access like Spotify—a music streaming platform which is changing not only the way we listen to music but what, as listeners, we want from it—and Facebook and YouTube, whose algorithms of recommendation can steer its users unawares into dark, shadowy pools of belief and propaganda—symbolize the ways that technological biases are made opaque, locking out users from the discourses of change and agency. As we increasingly doubt the veracity and the concreteness of the discourse we participate in, we're increasingly kept at arm's length from real investment in both political and cultural processes, in a state of skepticism as to our own agency.

For the purposes of this thesis, I shall be addressing the idea that technology—or more specifically the *interests* behind modern technology—in many cases entrenches and problematizes the very things that on the surface it claims to solve.

## Becoming a Brand: Personal Agency and the Privatized Self

The success of social media is predicated on rewarding simple human instincts: the desire to connect and interact with those of a like mind, to feel one's tastes and opinions validated amongst one's peers. Personalizing the experience for every user, and making each of us invested in becoming visible on its platform, is of course enormously rewarding for the technology companies: to enfranchise the individual user is also to monetize them.

Here lies the success in what social media offers, innovated initially by social media pioneers like Myspace and Facebook, and perfected over the years by a smaller and smaller core of social media brands including Twitter, Snapchat, Whatsapp and Instagram (the latter two eventually eaten up by Facebook, as per the dog-eat-dog economics of Silicon Valley). What's on offer is a highly personalized, empowering vision of personal technology, pregnant with possibility for the individual, a powerful conduit for one's potential as a unique entity in a sea of users. The implication is that the social media platform is nothing more than a neutral template upon which simply projecting the uniqueness of your personality will allow you to flourish. But the truth is, the more you become invested in feeding intimate, personal content into the branded engines of the internet, the greater the reward for those platforms in their ability to target you as a consumer, harvest valuable information about your tastes and aspirations, and hone their tools more perfectly as must-have outlets for personal expression.

Technology platforms invariably pitch themselves to the user in terms of self-empowerment, offering total connectivity in the name of collective engagement and instantaneous communication. And in many ways, we are more liberated than we have ever been to express our opinions and choices: even to pursue the economic opportunities

that technology offers. And yet, at the same time technology makes such great claims for social improvement, our politics feels splintered and compromised, and more troubling than this, global wealth inequality is more entrenched than it has been for twenty-five years. As *Inequality.org* reports, "ultra high net worth individuals… hold 11.3% of total global wealth, yet represent only a tiny fraction (0.003%) of the world population" ("Global Inequality").

It is in such turbulent times that social media has turned the notions of private and public on their heads. What is positioned as the public arena of discourse, a necessary cultural space in which we have an obligation to participate, is for the most part privately owned, not to mention fundamentally reliant on models of data capitalism in order to survive and proliferate. As individualized, invested users, using social technologies in part as a vehicle for ourselves, we must, therefore, make brands of our ambitions and choices—essentially 'privatize' ourselves as miniature corporate entities.

Between the private, incentivized world of technology brands, and the public good they are deemed to be doing in offering technologies of immediacy and interaction, sit the users, co-opted on both sides. We must stand out, but fit in: use, update, integrate, assimilate, or be left behind.

The groupthink to much of the determinism that comes with this kind of reasoning is both explicit and implied: a join-or-die mentality which serves to entrench its own assumptions. Digital literacy is deemed as necessary as it is empowering: we can be baffled and cowed by its intractable mystique, or we can dive feet first into its promise, schooling ourselves in the socioeconomic promise hidden in the unlocking of its codes. "The information economy needs more programmers, and young people need jobs in the future," James Bridle writes of the prevailing logic in public debate. "But learning to code is not enough, just as learning to plumb a sink is not enough to understand the

complex interactions between water tables, political geography, aging infrastructure, and social policy" (*New Dark Age*, 3).

The blurring of the boundaries between public and private in many ways mirrors the blurring of the notions of agency and subjugation in the face of technology. Privatizing oneself as a user symbolizes submission to a system of economic imbalance and corporate logic—one that makes us complicit in its efforts to diminish not only others, but ultimately ourselves.

Such counterintuitive consequences are a result of what Joanna Boehnert describes as an epistemological error inherent to technology design. "Designers participate in creating and reinforcing values. People internalize values that are part of the cultural environment, often uncritically" ("Design Industry," 132). Unwittingly, we have become increasingly invested in technologies which mask their anti-human outcomes.

## The Neutrality Myth: Hidden Ideology and Non-Consensual Consent

The issue of consent is one that goes to the heart of our modern-day relationship with smart technology, one that has been transformed in order that we may be as unencumbered as possible by troublesome small print and time-consuming box-checking. In being intentionally disconnected from acts of consent, the modern user is increasingly encouraged simply to sidestep a true understanding of the implications of use.

Part of this logic is based on a repeatedly implied concept that technology is there to act in your interests, to simply respond to and facilitate your needs as a user as opposed to standing in their way. Yet more and more of the objects and interactions we encounter have been silently curated, positioned and politicized without our consent.

Adam Greenfield suggests that private systems—of technology, governance, ownership or whatever—almost always come embedded with ideology, and it is incumbent upon the user to recognize this reality. As he notes, "we will have to stop treating the various networked technologies around us as givens… and learn to see them anew as bearers of ideology" ("Ideology"). His simple definition of ideology as an "unconscious body of assumptions" reminds us that it is the hidden ideologies in the systems of living that, either consciously or unconsciously, come to embody those systems: to be ignorant of, or negligent to, their effects is to become an agent of them ("Ideology").

Online, our interactions with technology invariably consist of concealed transactions. Terms and conditions have become purposefully dense: our interaction with those terms is deemed a nuisance, something easily designed away as an insignificant distraction. With my work I want to ask what it really means to accept the extant ideologies which underpin technology, to willingly accept the reductive terms on offer.

In *New Dark Age*, artist and writer James Bridle discusses the dangers of computational thinking: the assumption that computers are neutral and therefore, by default, correct. "As computation and its products [are] increasingly... assigned power and the ability to generate truth," he argues, "so reality itself takes on the appearance of a computer; and our modes of thought follow suit" (43). By depending on automated thinking, we proceed to a point where eventually we no longer have reason to question it.

My concern is that 'consent'—the act of explicitly entering into a contract of understanding—is something that is increasingly being designed out of technological interactions, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the smartphone rewards the user with instant results, since it embodies a logic of convenience and rapidity. It is designed to effect a result with the minimum of fuss or intervention: for instance, ordering a product

to be delivered in the shortest time possible. This is the *raison d'être* of a company like Amazon: instantaneous, frictionless fulfillment of a requirement or desire. Anything that complicates or obstructs the speed of response is effectively a failure of the technology, and thereby of the business. When convenience denotes the success of a technology, it soon becomes a prerequisite for that success.

But aside from the simple matter of convenience, there is a further implication to this erosion of consent. Its consequence becomes its *intent* when matters of personal agency, of choice and decision-making, are purposefully removed. In this sense, consent is an ideological barrier as much as a practical one. If the technology can presuppose your acquiescence as a *principle* of its use, it is a shortcut to providing you with services, or ideas—literally any kind of content—*you didn't even know you wanted*. In opening a window on your choices and tastes, you may be unwittingly giving consent for companies to analyze, and then *anticipate* your behavior, your beliefs and proclivities, and in the same instant, reiterate them.

An obvious example of this kind of design in action is described in detail on the website *Darkpatterns.org*. The site describes how purposefully misleading design choices "shame the user into compliance" or force them to "overshare by mistake" (a term it has dubbed "Zuckering") (Brignull). In hidden small print on any given website, you may unwittingly be giving permission to allow your data to be sold to any number of data brokers, who in turn can resell that data in packaged units likely to contain intimate information about your sexual preferences, your credit or medical history. For the companies involved, it is necessarily important to keep such terms as opaque and hidden as possible.

## ‘Surveillance Capitalism’: Trading Privacy for Access

As Shoshana Zuboff contends, “surveillance capitalists… accumulate vast domains of knowledge *from* us, but not *for* us” (11). Many companies now explicitly espouse the trade-off we are habituated to in our usage of apps and devices in order to maximize and optimize the reach and effectiveness of their services and products. The smart home is now big business—estimated to generate $195 billion in revenue by 2021—and in catering to the observed realities of our lives, can be shown to refine and improve the user experience (Murison). In the case of the smart thermostat, observing the nuances of a user’s daily heating requirements can be logically spun as a route to all-important savings for the user, since it can eradicate unnecessary temperature rises and ‘learn’ to turn itself off when you’re away or asleep. But at what point does ‘learning’ become eavesdropping, and at what point does eavesdropping turn into manipulating?

One owner of a Ring doorbell camera I spoke to noted that having linked the Ring application to his Nextdoor account (a social media platform for users in the same neighborhood), he started to see a slew of Nextdoor posts detailing how vital smart cameras are in preventing crime and spotting ‘suspicious’ activity. The trade-off here approaches a kind of explicit simplicity: use our product to monitor the environment around your house, and share the information it records to guarantee security for all. But who decides whether a figure passing your house is ‘suspicious’ or not? For the private company harvesting data from a permanent camera feed of your front yard, it would seem the impetus to generate alerts based on the safety of your home is a simple way to undermine your sense of security and thereby monetize your paranoia.

The choice is increasingly an explicit choice, made in full cognizance of both technology provider and consumer. We routinely use personal data to pay for powerful,

seemingly ‘free’ digital tools: the commodification of this data has become a lucrative way to profile and target us as users, consumers—even voters.

The prevailing logic goes that essentially ‘free’ apps like Gmail, Google Maps and Instagram are simple technological resources, complimentary tools to make life and our ability to connect with each other more fluid. But we pay for such products with a detailed picture of ourselves drawn in information, a body of lucrative personal data that proves particularly effective in profiling and targeting us as consumers. For Zuboff, the stakes of this transaction have never been higher, since, contrary to more benign assessments of the bargain being struck, “you are not the product; you are the abandoned carcass. The ‘product’ derives from the surplus that is ripped from your life” (377).

There is at heart a contempt for the user written in these examples. That a user accepts the trade-off and enters into it wittingly does not belie the fact that in every transaction, the ability to retain agency and autonomy over choices is diminished. And so it goes that agency transferred to the corporate platform is agency lost, not gained: it is power that is stolen, or at the very least withheld from you.

## The Emperor’s New Clothes of Technocratic ‘Progress’

The cumulative effect of the various manifestations of technological thinking I have described is a dogged exaltation of the culture of technological determinism into all aspects of daily life. As a consequence, in viewing technological solutions as a cure-all approach to both personal and social problems, we fail to acknowledge that many of the innovations we reach for only entrench and uphold the political impasses and inequalities of the status quo.

As Jonathan Taplin notes, at heart, "social networks are powerful engines of conformity," preventing us from "develop[ing] [our] own ideas, identities and political affiliations" (156). And yet, it is a kind of conformity that almost revels in its own misdirection, given the industry's preponderance for terms like 'disruption' and 'breaking things'; its desire to characterize an unruly form of innovation as key to social and human improvement. Facebook, for instance, in elevating a vision of itself as a stealth innovator of social 'hacking' to the level of corporate mantra, has "taken the language of radical individualism and deployed it in the service of conformism" (Foer, 208). It is what I think of as an Emperor's New Clothes effect, where paying lip-service to the notion of change only hides the real intention: to embed technology capitalism into our everyday digital experiences. By mimicking lively civic discourse—albeit a discourse which plays out on the virtual plane rather than in the real world—we're being distracted from big technology's true ambition: to guarantee itself as *the* central cultural and economic system of our lived experience.

Perhaps the most pernicious consequence of the fevered scramble to normalize, and then constantly reinvent, our relationship to technology capitalism is this false sense of progress and change it trades in. And it is this failing that has become the key to my MFA study, especially given the punk inspirations that initially led me to pursue creative discourse in the first place, and the ongoing relationship with countercultural forms that underpins my journey into the topic.

For some, it is the very desire for uninterrupted access to myriad forms of self-replacing 'content' that itself blocks us from a true alternative vision of the status quo of capitalism: as Mark Fisher notes, "the capacity to make an infinity of meaningless choices has replaced the capacity to actually change things" ("Do You Miss the Future?"). For Fisher, the technologies of accelerating late capitalism create insubstantial,

illusionary spaces where our dreams and desires play out only as digital simulacra, precluding us from reaching for political alternatives. Living in a 'post-cultural' loop of information, we come instead to fetishize facsimiles of those alternatives, offering more and more of ourselves up as content, but in forms ever more stripped of real-world, practical value.

Such a vision of cultural stasis is echoed in Franklin Foer's discussion of "the automation of thinking" (219). The history of technology is, of course, a history of innovations that have repeatedly cured and solved in the service of true human advancement: medicine, energy, sanitation, and education all being areas that have been radically improved in the cause of human good over the last century. But to hand over the coming social transformations to a small technocratic elite of Silicon Valley capitalists, eager to automate human life in the name of profit, is to leave us more vulnerable than ever to an impasse between cultural and technological progress. We should not conflate technology with creativity: and yet in automating even the simplest of tasks in the home, like asking Amazon's AI speaker Alexa to curate a playlist of music for us, in a subtle way we let go of the reigns of choice, handing over human and cultural decisions to algorithms. And it's possible to trace the consequences of that shift away from human agency, even in the seemingly inconsequential world of pop music.

Writing on the changing landscape of music and the corporate ethos of streaming platform Spotify, Liz Pelly considers how music makers have become "beholden to the whim of a platform they can't control," because of Spotify's pursuit of "a strategy that would see music creation and discovery become more automated and data-driven, and, as much as possible, human-free." ("Unfree Agents"). If we are uneasy that Ring programs its cameras to draw conclusions about the suspiciousness of the people and events it records, I suggest that we should be just as uneasy about how a piece of code concludes

what's appropriate for us to listen to. As one music executive observes, Spotify playlists ultimately converge towards "inoffensive, bland music" that listeners "can't be bothered to turn off," resulting in something "that isn't art, it's wallpaper" (Iqbal). To compete, let alone thrive, within the parameters of what Spotify's algorithms deem acceptable, is necessarily to conform to a machine-designated vision of what music—and by extension culture itself—must be.

This vision of cultural automation—of what one Spotify executive foresees as "self-driving music"—seems likely to become the logical conclusion of Spotify's innovations, and the consequences will be profound for music creators in much the way that we already understand the implications of automation for truck drivers or manual workers (Pelly). The effects, in fact, will be profound for all of us, since they'll be a result not just of our own demands for technological convenience, but importantly, of our *consent* for it. The outcome, intended or otherwise, of these experiments in cultural and social automation—of the algorithmic shortcuts which are designed to streamline our needs and choices—is, as Franklin Foer contends, "to make human beings predictable—to anticipate their behavior, which makes them easier to manipulate" (219). Or, to put it another way: the result of the technological opacity of machine thinking "is always and inevitably violence" (Bridle, 157).

* * *

One of the things that rapidly shifting, endlessly customizable technologies of content offer is a kind of impermanence, a nebulous form of discourse that we are never quite sure we entirely trust. And if we don't trust, let alone understand, the picture of the world that technology generates, we've already become a component of its violence.

Throughout human history, we have submitted ourselves to both the possibilities and the realities of technological solutions, for better or worse. But when a reliance on solving through machine thinking—predicated on data capitalism—leads to entrenched economic disparities, inflamed social divisions and imposed violence, then it is more vital than ever to confront the logic of those solutions in as robust and uncompromising a manner as possible.

# EXISTING RESPONSES/DISCOURSE

## Theoretical Overview

No discussion of the relationship between technology and capitalism is possible without at least giving an overview of the theoretical frameworks and critical positions that have shed light on the terms of my investigation. While such an exploration could easily become overly long-winded and exhaustive, stretching as far back to the economic and political analyses of such thinkers as Marx and Nietzsche, the scope of the discussion herein will focus primarily on the positions that are most pertinent to the more recent implications of technology in the internet era.

Whether or not one acknowledges that the age of the internet, and in turn the age of smart technology (also known as 'the internet of things'), comes slap-bang at a high point of what Fredric Jameson calls the phase of 'postmodernity'—a uniquely anxious and self-conscious period of cultural and political pushback against the progressive cultural and social advances of the mid-20$^{th}$ century—I think it is fair to say that the instantaneity of access to internet technologies and the implications for individuals' privacy and values brings for many a sense of cultural anxiety and disconnection with a dependable discourse of reality, which makes the ability to define a common understanding of events and situations an elusive prospect.

For Jameson, the cause of this cultural anxiety can in part be attributed to a shift in political priorities and aspirations, and the resulting forms of 'neoliberal' governance and economics that came about in the 1970s and '80s. What Jameson names the "cultural logic" of postmodernity takes hold during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, during which the rights of the corporation and the individual are

prioritized over social conditions (46). Most telling of all in Jameson's cultural analysis is his identification of what he calls the "nostalgia mode" in much of the art and culture of postmodernity—an almost paranoid fetishizing and swapping-out of past cultural forms as a way to make sense of a rapidly changing information age (20). It's this kind of perceptive unpicking of technology's cultural effects, and their political implications, that has given me license to question the impacts of technology and find historical causes and justifications to confront them.

Elsewhere, I've lent on Jean Baudrillard's work, which concerns the shifting sense of reality that comes hand-in-hand with the proliferation of technological, visual and news media forms in the late 20th century. His concept of 'simulacra' posits the possibility that as we become more invested and immersed in media depictions of life, we increasingly live in a 'fake' version of reality, where the televised image of an event and the actual event itself become one and same: neither is truly lived, both are equally impermanent. He takes this notion to a contentious conclusion in one of his later works *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, in which he describes how the warfare unfolding on television has become so 'hyperreal' as to serve as a complete substitute for the need for the war to take place at all. Baudrillard's elevation of technology almost to the level of a kind of fetishized magic is not without its critics: for me, however, he powerfully skewers and confronts the fantastical limits of technology, by interrogating the outcomes—both intended and accidental—of the determinism that brings media overload not just into our homes and our palms, but onto our very understanding of the world.

Mark Fisher, ostensibly writing in the 2010s, builds on and updates Jameson's theories for the age of social media, importantly bringing a raft of music and pop culture knowledge to the discussion about our changing relationship to our surroundings, and the politics of agency. Starting his writing life as a blogger obsessing over various forms of

rave and post-punk music culture, Fisher's work serves as a generational link to my own experience, given our similar age and background, but more importantly, forms the most coherent framework I've encountered to account for how, and why, we find ourselves in a state of cultural uncertainty—as the countercultural ideas that seemed so transgressive and insurrectionary in the mouths of punk lyricists have been gradually co-opted and made safe by capitalism's insatiable appetite to subsume every form of resistant discourse.

One of Fisher's most compelling concepts is that of 'capitalist realism,' which suggests that modern culture, under siege from austerity politics and in a frenzy of self-repeating media forms, finds itself stymied in its attempts to conjure up political alternatives. He suggests our subordination to an "infinitely plastic" technological reality is rooted in neoliberal capitalism's manifestation as a kind of governed insecurity, which imposes the logic of privatization across previously uncommodified areas of personal experience (*Capitalist Realism*, 54). Obviously, there's a kind of dystopian fatalism to this idea, but one that rings true to me, and in a strange way, opens up opportunities to confront and look beyond such a reality merely by invoking it.

Of perhaps the most historical relevance to the intent in my work, especially as it pertains to punk's roots and practices, are the works of Guy Debord and the Situationist International (or 'SI'). The methods and intentions of the SI, such as confronting advertising in the form of works of disruptive '*détournement*', and inspiring many of the anti-capitalist calls-to-arms found in the May 1968 student movement, were particularly influential on British punk originators like the Sex Pistols and Gang of Four, who, despite occupying vastly different positions within punk—as high-visibility, messy nihilism in the case of the Pistols, and earnest Marxist analysis in that of the Gang of Four—were both nevertheless key embodiments of the contrary spirit of punk confrontation. The

intentions of the SI suggest a very real and thrilling countercultural narrative to the prevailing status quo in their texts and social interventions, and in many ways stand as one of the most compelling forms of countercultural intervention in the 20th century.

Guy Debord's 1967 defining Situationist work *The Society of the Spectacle* preempts all of the above discussions regarding technology's underpinning of authoritarian structures and its tendency to camouflage human subjugation beneath flashing lights and shiny buttons. Within it, Debord details how "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation," arguing that 'spectacular' forms of media and imagery implying connection and fulfillment are in fact mirages, projections of an impossible life that serve only to oppress (2). What in the 1960s was perhaps a speculative, fanciful notion of capitalism's workings may, in our fevered times of media saturation and infinitely scrolling content, have become a perfectly feasible, even accepted idea.

## The Current Field of Artists and Design Practitioners

While I have found ample sources of inspiration for my topic in the above examples of critical writing in the annals of theory, it's important to situate such ideas around real-world interventions into the debate, especially those that confront and utilize the very forms of technology that I have outlined as carrying problematic provenance. German theorist and writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger pointedly sums up the importance of this approach in his essay "Constituents of a Theory of the Media":

> Every use of the media presupposes manipulation. The most elementary processes in media production, from the choice of the medium itself to

> shooting, cutting, synchronization, dubbing, right up to distribution, are all operations carried out on the raw material. There is no such thing as unmanipulated writing, filming, or broadcasting. The question is therefore not whether the media are manipulated, but who manipulates them. A revolutionary plan should not require the manipulators to disappear; on the contrary, it must make everyone a manipulator (51).

Perhaps the most significant practitioner in the field of manipulation at the current moment is James Bridle, whose writing has already appeared in the arguments of this thesis. Bridle's 2018 book *New Dark Age* outlines the various dangers inherent to modern forms of technology in a series of astute, logical summaries: but what sets him apart are his practical forays of programming and design, most of which fall somewhere between art, activism, and hacking.

Bridle gives talks, presents radio programs, and writes copiously on the topic of new technology, but he also builds speculative design projects and art installations which specialize in critiquing the power and assumptions that govern modern technological forms. Of these experiments, one of the most intriguing is *Autonomous Trap*, which consists of series salt lines places around a self-driving vehicle, demonstrating how simple it is to disable an AI system with human logic. Another powerful Bridle project is *Dronestagram*, an Instagram feed detailing the locations of a number of fatal drone strikes between 2011 and 2014. The project is a particularly effective combination of social media platform and political activism, using a seemingly innocent form of technology to draw parallels with another, altogether more deadly one: and yet it is the functionality of Instagram as a simple image curation tool, converted into a library of military targets, that reminds us that technologies of violence come in many forms.

Charlotte Webb is the brains and the chief designer behind the 'Feminist Internet' project, found online at *Feministinternet.com*. Webb's projects look to identify

specific biases preloaded into forms of AI technology and counteract them: most notably the way in which the internet has been designed to cater to, and rely on, largely male perspectives of coding and use in order to function. In contrast to data-based projects that analyze web use to demonstrate a phenomenon at the point of output, Webb's approach attempts to confront the problem at source, generating new, improved versions of the tools that we are already familiar with. It is an admirable undertaking, aimed at encouraging participation and collaboration in order to address fundamental technology flaws.

*The New Inquiry*'s "BailBloc" tool is further example of a creative use of essentially authoritarian technologies in order to flip their use against themselves. The project allows interested users to utilize their dormant PC or laptop's computation power to mine the cryptocurrency Monero, the proceeds of which are converted to dollars and donated to the Immigrant Bail Fund in order to fight the state's predisposition towards deportation and incarceration.

In the realm of music, a tool of particular interest is Mat Dryhurst's *Saga* program, a media player designed to subvert the monopoly platforms that host music technologies. The point of *Saga* is to allow artists to "change the meaning of their work depending where it's hosted," allowing the artist to set conditions upon whether, how, and for how long a piece of music or video is displayed, and exactly what it will look like in context (Wilson, 2015).

All of these examples are forms of what Rita Raley has dubbed 'tactical media'—a form of "critical intervention" explicitly working within the digital forms it intends to critique (6). They all have something to bring to the conversation in employing both practical and speculative design forms: and yet while direct intervention is an important element of the critique for me, I find myself coming back to the theoretical discussion

and considering what other ‘punk’ and countercultural forms of technology critique might look like: those explicitly built using technology, as well as those confronting both resistances and capitulations to technological forms.

# MY METHODS/APPROACH

## Intent Versus Form

In terms of my own practical design interventions, my intention during my MFA study has been to offer a convocation of approaches and forms, all geared in a similar direction, but framing the issues in a number of ways. Since, as I have outlined, the symptoms of the problem manifest in varying ways, the approach should likewise vary. My aim, therefore, has been to create an artillery of weapons in order to tackle the issues at stake.

One of the pieces of feedback I received during my second design review was the idea that I am working on a 'philosophical algorithm' representing opportunities to apply the scope of what I am doing across multiple forms. My ultimate focus, however, given the scope of the problems involved, is in proposing tactics that in particular expose the hidden ideology within everyday technology and make more explicit our complicity in the bargains we strike with it.

Punk is the running thread through this discussion, and its philosophies (or perhaps anti-philosophies) embody a unique approach to cultural intervention. In the various arguments about modernism, postmodernism, the mainstream and alternative culture, punk came very much as a kind of explosive, nihilistic flashpoint aimed at entirely torpedoing the terms of reference for music and cultural commentators, but also as a kind of 'year zero' reset, a disavowal of the history of youth culture but also—and this is the important part—its *future*. As Johnny Rotten famously snarled, "there's no future in England's dreaming," a sentiment which was in many ways the most transgressive, but simultaneously resonant, message of punk ("God Save the Queen").

And yet, almost all discourse within the field of design is explicitly future-facing: it is concerned with solving, correcting, improving and reiterating, with tackling missteps, with predicting exactly what kinds of things we'll be using and setting the terms for their use.

Of course, design is also about capitalism, and capitalism's insistence on growth and use and waste and reinvention, or as Joanna Boehnert points out, "design is… involved in concealing the impacts of consumer capitalism and in obfuscating power relations" (*Ecocene*, 5). We live in a world of dwindling fossil resources, and yet show a remarkable reluctance to slow down our addiction to them, or to the technologies that have in themselves been traditionally massively reliant on them.

So it is we need to find patterns of confronting the intention of forms which all too thoughtlessly rely on existing design logics to prolong anti-human outcomes. If, as Greil Marcus suggests, punk was in the business of "destroying one tradition" in order to reveal a new one, given that it "immediately discredited the music that preceded it [and] denied the legitimacy of anyone who'd had a hit, or played as if he knew how to play," it seems fairly evident to me that such an approach is more than appropriate in facing down technologies of oppression, which more than ever find themselves nested and buried within their own manifest logic, there (despite what the tech companies pay lip-service to) to sustain themselves as a self-justifying continuation of the status quo (Marcus, 37).

## Design Forms: Themes and Intentions

My purpose in the final year of study was to synthesize my intentions, theories, and inspirations into a series of one-off and connected projects which would bring

together my interests and play to my various creative strengths. I group these projects under a series of loose headings, which necessarily overlap into each other, but are at least a good roadmap for the types of design intervention I set out to make. Above all, I felt there was a case to diversify the forms of my work, encouraging me to utilize a variety of media, creating physical products, websites, speculative experiences, as well as an immersive space.

## CREATING A MANIFESTO

Inspired in part by Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* from the late 1960s, and the work of text-based artists such as Jenny Holzer and Han Haacke, I hoped to forge a cohesive 'manifesto' of sorts which would encompass all my related theoretical and design inquiry into an overarching language or discourse. In the words of Vivian Gornick, "a manifesto is the proper form for the declaration of war, [both] cultural and psychological war," and given the entrenched forces I've discussed, there is a case for suggesting that the modes, or at least the language, of warfare, seems like a valid starting point of intent (xvii).

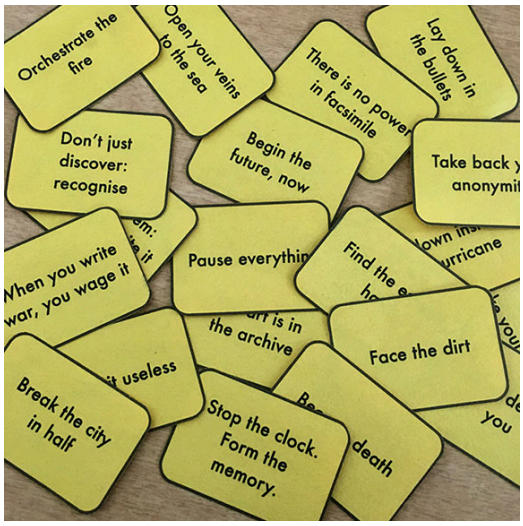


**Fig. 1: 'Bleak Strategies' deck**

A couple of examples of my manifesto forms include a deck of dystopian prompts (in the mold of Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies*) entitled *Bleak Strategies*, and a graphic zine entitled *Rules of the Future*.

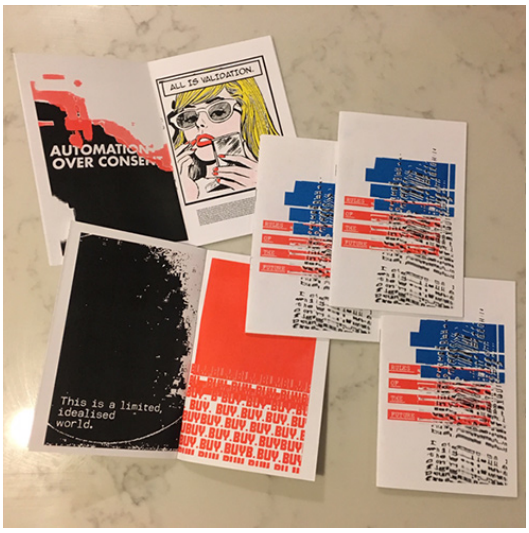


**Fig. 2: 'Rules of the Future'**

## THE AUTOMATION OF LISTENING

"The Automation of Listening" is the title of a talk I gave at UCLA in February 2018, which served as an opportunity to talk about punk culture in relation to my study of big technology and the resulting changes in cultural attitudes and habits in the consumption of music. Drawing on my experience as a musician, I was able to frame my ideas about design and counterculture to a broad academic audience and discuss the consequences of allowing our cultural choices to be funneled exclusively through private platforms.

Shifting this topic back to my design work allowed me to incorporate my skills and experience working with sound and music, in order to create an interactive experience that questions the logic of curatorial automation, and consider ways to intervene in it. Ostensibly a sound-design project, I also positioned the piece as a form of brand critique by titling the project *Stopify*.

*Stopify* was designed explicitly to mimic the look and feel of the Spotify interface,

right down to the way the play and pause buttons behave on click and mouse-over events. But there was a twist: in the *Stopify* interface, a number of audio tracks can play at the same time, in contrast to Spotify's linear, automated playback. I wanted to confront the passive modes of listening that Spotify depends on and its self-generating mood-based playlists, which are designed to favor the least challenging, most generic music forms.

By recording a piece of music, as well as narrating a section of prose I'd written called "Permanent Present," and incorporating pieces of guitar noise and ambience, I created an interactive sound-space which allowed for a unique sonic experience. As I suggest in "Permanent Present," Spotify dictates that "you are being permanently listened to, but remain utterly unheard. Its victory [is] to make your revolution the same cause as theirs… to put down the rebellion in your own heart and conform."

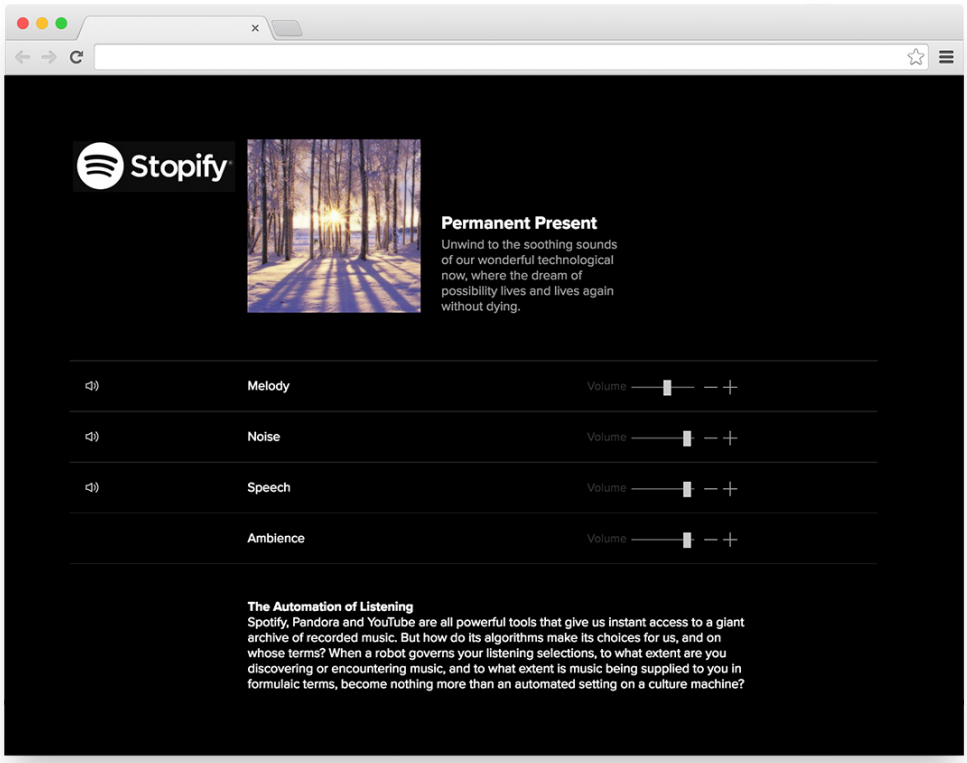


**Fig. 3: 'Stopify' interface**

## Design as Writing

I decided fairly early on in my design study that my choices in terms of form and intent were liable to overlap between written, graphic and theoretical approaches. I think of my artwork as a written form: in turn, my designs are often just words. In writing articles and giving talks, I've realized how important it is to design the shape and content of my ideas, and that bringing a designer's eye to these forms can really clarify the terms of the debate.

One of the drawbacks in reaching for traditionally 'designed' responses within my topic is the feeling I often have of replicating biases and problems by relying on the technological forms I'm trying to confront. Invariably, I have concluded a way to make sense and give shape to my ideas is simply to write them out.

### THE THEORY OF 'UNCHANGE'

*Unchange* is a manifesto of sorts which I've fleshed out into a longer piece of writing, with the ultimate intention of publishing in some form (it's currently online at the website *Medium*). Essentially, it's a theory of political and social determinism in big technology as predicated on the fallacy of constant 'progress', which is at best short-lived and obsolescent; at worst illusory, serving to entrench social, economic and political impasses. This concept attempts to challenge the modern technological obsession with permanent innovation, critiquing big technology's churning, self-replacing insistence on solving non-existent problems. With *unchange*, I'm attempting to call out the Emperor's New Clothes of technocratic progress. It is intended as a manifesto of exposure:

> Unchange has become the *raison d'etre* of modern technology. In demanding autonomy, in enabling full anonymity, in the supposed utopian freedom of cultural access and its coital adhesion to data-driven capitalism, today's digital platforms are designed to steal power from us. The great leaps of miniaturized connectivity, unchecked by ethical considerations, have brought surveillance into our lives, our homes, even our opinions, stealing our privacy and agency in plain, consensual sight. We've invited power to leave out of the doorways we opened on ourselves. ("Social Media.")

### SATIRE: LANGUAGE AS A WEAPON

Given that I have an affinity for the written word—as much in linguistic terms as in the graphic sense—I generally find playing with and confronting assumptions about language a powerful starting point for my designs. Again, this dovetails neatly with the philosophies of punk, which often responded to received forms of social and cultural language by subverting or attacking them. In my work, I have similarly looked to take established, sacred symbols and signifiers of culture and tried to misdirect them.


**Fig. 4: Selections from the 'Slogans' series**

In terms of my thesis topic, I decided to work with the language of social, and by extension, digital interaction. I started off creating a series of textual interventions—little dystopian statements that could be applied to various situations, designed to be critical and culturally loaded. These amounted to a series of slogans, inspired in part by Jenny

Holzer's *Truisms*, but with a more apocalyptic outlook. I then looked at ways of trying to seed these phrases into unexpected spaces in our surroundings, which led me to an abortive project called *Fortune 500 Cookies*, for which I baked a batch of fortune cookies and inserted the phrases inside them—making for seemingly innocent artifacts whose use has been transformed. The cookies were accurate right down to the blue Times New Roman font and the small blue notches, the familiar hallmarks of fortune cookie inserts.

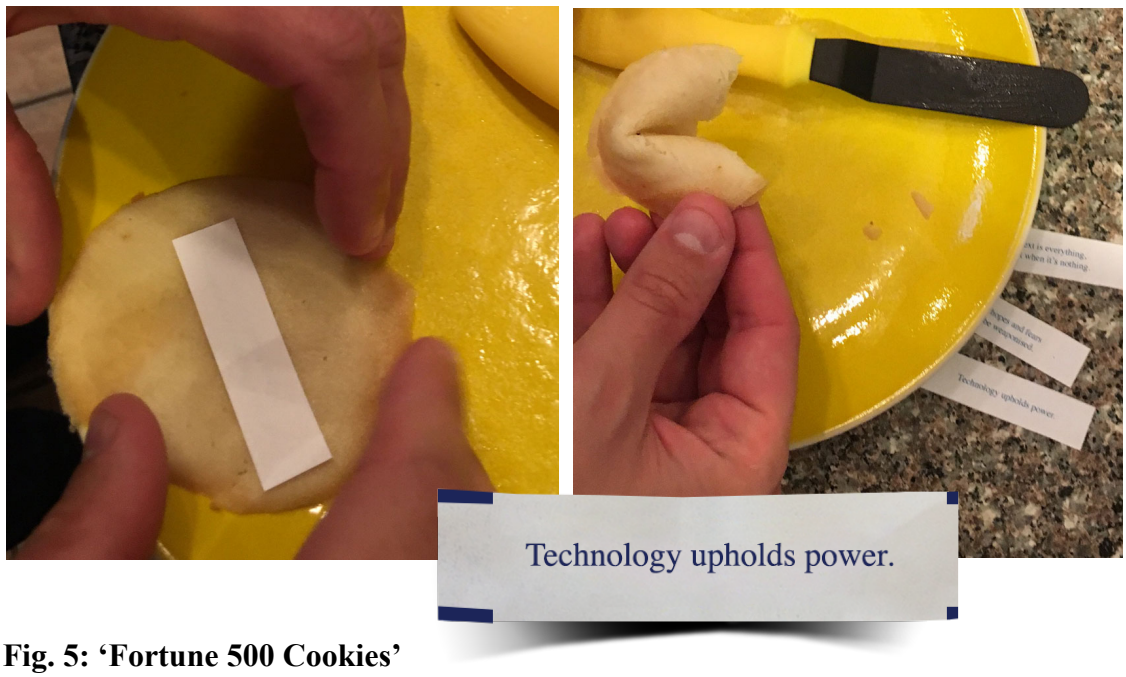


**Fig. 5: 'Fortune 500 Cookies'**

While the fortune cookie project didn't advance far beyond this point, it was a reminder that the power of playing with language is often as much to do with context as it is the words themselves. This led to another one-off piece entitled *A Guide to the Signs of Texas*, whereby I photographed familiar road signs and created a satirical DMV-style highway code booklet (its aesthetic, in keeping with countless state and federal forms of branding, carefully 'undesigned'). Again, the writing was loaded with imposing authoritarian language and misdirection: essentially this formed a further companion

piece to the main focus of my thesis work, although the investment I made into crafting an imperious corporate tone for its language paid dividends for my later *Panoptica* installation.


**Fig. 6: 'A Guide to the Signs of Texas'**

Alongside these pieces, I played with a couple of different game-like web interactions for a series entitled *The War on Truth*. Aesthetically inspired, on the one hand, by the 1983 John Badham film *WarGames*, and on the other, by Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*, its focus was in confronting the dangers of online bias, and exposing how easily it is weaponized against us. One of these projects, *Bias Machine*, considered the possibility of analyzing partisan news and automating its political bias by way of a simple slider. It was during this period of my MFA study that I was particularly interested in how designing card games and board games might be a way to smuggle forms of critique into otherwise innocuous products.

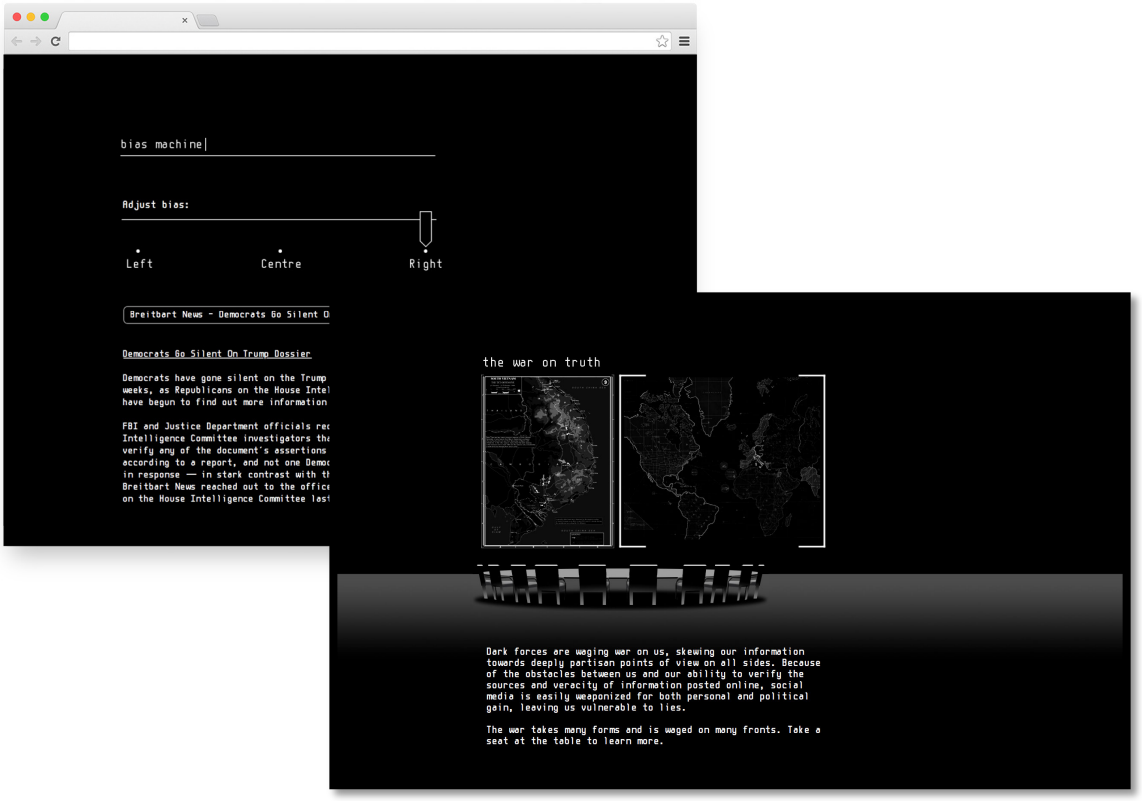


**Fig. 7: Screenshots from 'The War on Truth'**

## Thesis Projects: Becoming the Product

The themes of my final thesis projects began to coalesce in late 2018, as I started to explore more thoroughly the notion of consent within our online experience, and to look at how complicit we are in the transaction between data and agency.

While confronting technological opacity should necessarily focus on the proprietary intentions of technology's gatekeepers, I've found it as important to confront the *users* of products as it is the *makers* of them, in order to comment on our being complicit with—as opposed to simply subjected to—the various ways that design and technology undermine personal freedom and agency. As I've suggested, punk discourse makes a point of implicating the viewer, rather than simply absolving them by abstracting power struggles to inaccessible matters of 'high art'. Similarly, the title of the project *I Am the Product* removes any doubt as to the role of the user/viewer in the matter of agency. To the extent that we do consent to surveillance capitalism, we are complicit with it: what better way to remind us of this than to write it in plain terms, in big black letters on a T-shirt?

### 'Terms and Conditions': Implicating the User

This project, which began life with the title *The Privatization of the Self* (later simplified to *Terms and Conditions*), became part of my overarching manifesto of intent during my second year of study. The project initially consisted of speculative imagery, as I mocked up products and spaces which force us to reckon with the digital terms and conditions we habitually agree to. I wanted to imagine what it would look like if these conditions were made more explicit and visible in our everyday interactions, and we were

compelled to continually reckon with them. Would we be so quick to click on the 'Accept' and 'I Agree' buttons in this context?


**Fig. 8: 'Driving Terms'**

The next step on from this was to make something more interactive. The result was a quick idea for a fake Google search—the idea being to obstruct the user, by creating repeated barriers to functionality. The full text of Google's terms and conditions are spelled out in a series of dialog pop-ups, one sentence at a time, meaning the user has to click a 'yes' button forty-three times before being able to access the search function. Here I was very much front-loading the issue of consent, by making it so explicit as to obstruct the viability of the design.

From here I moved on to a piece entitled *Full Terms*—a massively overlong T-shirt whose unwieldy design spells out the voluminous terms and conditions for wearing

it. I was particularly taken with the idea of problematizing the use of an object by employing consent as a radical blocking mechanism to the object's functionality.


**Fig. 9: 'Full Terms'**

The question I'm asking with this project is, would we be so quick to agree to everyday terms and conditions if we were more invested in what they *looked* like? The overlong T-shirt's effectiveness as just a simple product or piece of clothing is tripped up by its own candor, destroying its use as a garment (dare we call this a kind of 'punk' design?). While this is in many ways a speculative approach, it still provides concrete examples of what happens when you actually apply the idea to the design of a product, and the practical considerations that flow from it. There's a further layer of design critique embedded, since utilizing a piece of clothing literally *embodies* an idea or

challenge. The wearer becomes complicit, and in turn, advertises their complicity, triggering a chain reaction of intent and admission.

One of the most important statements of purpose that I uncovered around this point was that "I want to find more ways to say no." Part of the project was to design simple T-shirts that would do just that, alongside a collection entitled *Real Terms*, which makes explicit some of the actual terms that tech companies get you to agree to; for instance Facebook, where you are never truly able to delete your information from their servers, only 'pause' it.

In imagining objects whose use is compromised by making explicit the terms and conditions that users are generally encouraged to skip past or pay minimal mind to, I felt I'd hit upon a version of my thinking that had both a concrete form and the impactful textual qualities I look for.


**Fig. 10: 'Real Terms'**

## EXPLICIT COMPLICITY: 'I AM THE PRODUCT'

As Andrew Lewis noted as far back as 2010, the logic of 'free' tools dictates that "if you're not paying for it… you're the product" (*Metafilter*). And so the premise of *I Am The Product* is to explore this explicit trade-off of personal data for products, making the necessity to self-commodify more transparent. Developing the *Terms and Conditions* concept further, I wanted to design a T-shirt that would be cheaper to purchase the more intimate personal information one allow to be displayed on it. My aim was to confront consumers with the tactics they are submitting themselves to, in order to provoke critical reactions.


**Fig. 11: 'I Am The Product' web interface**


**Fig. 12: 'I Am The Product' T-shirt (photo: Sandy Carson)**

I explored two different iterations of the branding and the user experience in web applications, both versions of which allow the user/customer to design a T-shirt themselves on the screen, selecting boxes on the T-shirt itself and making the choices to populate it with their most personal information—such as sexual preference, race, and income. In the second iteration of the application, the customer watches in real time as the submission of data drops the price of the T-shirt: at the same time, their 'complicity level' rises from zero up to one-hundred percent.

The platform was fun to make, with simple branding and an immediate functionality, and I felt it communicated a point of view and a concept in plain, compelling terms. In fact, *I Am The Product* seemed ripe to be exploited into a brand of sorts, an online resource for a number of interventions into the submission of personal data.

The project raised important questions about the ownership of data, and how data in effect has become a new form of privilege: some of us may be able to afford to block, or appropriate how our data is used, but most of us aren't—or simply don't. Digital literacy is one tool in the pushback against that idea, but there is also clearly a gap in agency that's exploited by data capitalism. The message here is that we should be able to

explicitly take back ownership of our personal information, and use the knowledge and power this returns to us as a tool in reclaiming our actual selves back from the monopoly platforms that make us into mere data points.

### 'PANOPTICA': THE BUSINESS OF COMPLICITY

For the final installation piece of my MFA degree, I wanted to open up the scope of my ideas into more of an immersive experience. I was aware that at the conclusion of my degree study I'd have access to an exhibition space in order to create a more fleshed-out, three-dimensionally immersive version of my work, and my hope was it would be a step up from *I Am the Product*, offering a variety of interactive forms, all linked back to my central thesis theme.

Eventually, with some input from my supervisors, I hit upon ratcheting up the 'branding' idea by creating the reception space to a satirical corporation of the near-future, furnishing it with a full suite of branded elements. This was intended to be my most ambitious, immersive idea yet: a fully operational brand that could be stepped into and experienced.

The idea for calling the company *Panoptica* comes from a term which has found favor of late as a way to describe the implication of submitting oneself to the all-seeing gaze of social media and the internet of things. The 'Panopticon' is a kind of circular prison, initially conceived by social theorist Jeremy Bentham, but popularized in relation to society and power by Michel Foucault in his thesis of the carceral society *Discipline and Punish*. In the Panopticon, the cells are all on the perimeter of the building and a single guard has a 'panoptic' position in the center from which to observe: for Foucault,

the Panopticon stands for the authoritarian society, in which all of us are the inmates, and governing forms of power are permanently in a position to surveil and control us.

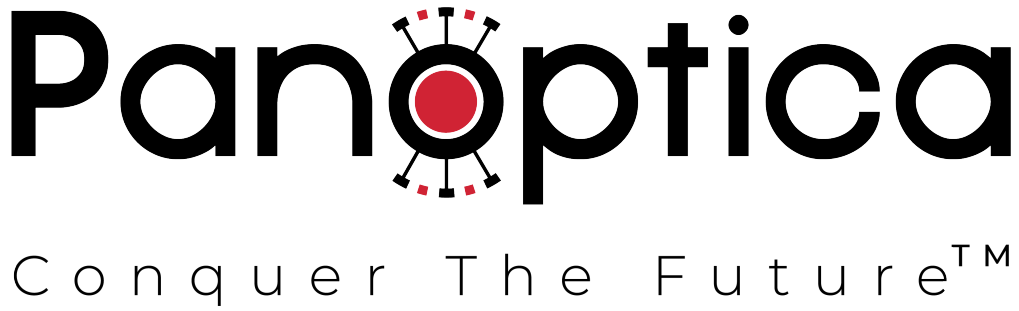


**Fig. 13: 'Panoptica' logo and tagline**

The name was easy, since it invoked the concept simply, and was neatly reinforced by using graphic elements from a Panopticon plan-drawing to make up the 'O'—coincidentally evoking the image of an eye or camera. The second element of the space I had to work with were two red velvet chairs, so I decided to use these to set the aesthetic tone, forming an inspiration for the entire color scheme and much of the illustrative graphics I planned to incorporate.

*Panoptica* is a satirical corporation that offers a suite of surveillance services on the theme of digital 'complicity'—the need to immerse oneself entirely into the tools and implications of the reconnaissance society. These services are not designed to emancipate the customer from the Panopticon however, but rather implicate themselves more deeply into its logic. The only way, as *Panoptica* suggests, to truly "live without conflict, without anxiety," is to submit yourself entirely to surveillance capitalism, in fact to become as complicit with it as possible. My aim was to take the language of what one might call corporate empowerment—the pleas to solidarity that one often finds in corporate literature and salesmanship—and thoroughly satirize it in order to summon up a

vision of a digital future in which the idea of human agency and individuality is anathema. As the *Panoptica* corporate video intones, “it’s never been easier to automate your emotions or your beliefs”.


**Fig. 14: ‘Panoptica’ reception desk and uniform**

Core to the *Panoptica* experience I intended to manifest in the installation space was the idea of what I was calling the ‘Complicity Audit’. This would be *Panoptica*’s way of assessing customers’ attitude to, and immersion in, the tools of surveillance and subjugation, in order to suggest—or indeed impose—ways to entrench them further. Visitors arriving in the space would encounter some kind of initial assessment based on the input of basic information, and then experience a sense of how *Panoptica* planned to ‘process’ them. This gave me the idea for some sort of customer-facing corporate video that would play in the waiting area, and a number of props that one might encounter within such a space, including a large reception desk, the imposing corporate logo, an intercom system (complete with vocal sound effects, giving cryptic clues as to the

unseemly things that might be actually happening in these 'audits') and other printed forms.


**Fig. 15: The entire 'Panoptica' installation space (photo: Sandy Carson)**

Overall, I wanted to take all the resources available to me as part of the design program and put as many of them as I could to work in the service of a holistic vision of the *Panoptica* experience. It meant tackling a whole raft of different forms of design production: print, video and sound (I composed and recorded a piece of music for the short corporate film); interior design; even digital embroidery, since I was able to take advantage of UT's Foundry resource in order to stitch the *Panoptica* logo into a red uniform. Further to all of these elements, I took on a programming challenge in order to create not only the interactive customer 'kiosk' which would print out an instant 'complicity assessment,' but also a fully functioning website visitors could interact with on a computer on the reception desk, created at the domain *ThePanoptica.com*. The kiosk was in many ways the most challenging part of the project, since it required a degree of

finessing and troubleshooting in order to make a web page communicate with an Epson receipt printer: this was a key element though, since the sound and output of the printer would serve as a timely reminder of the consumer transaction taking place.

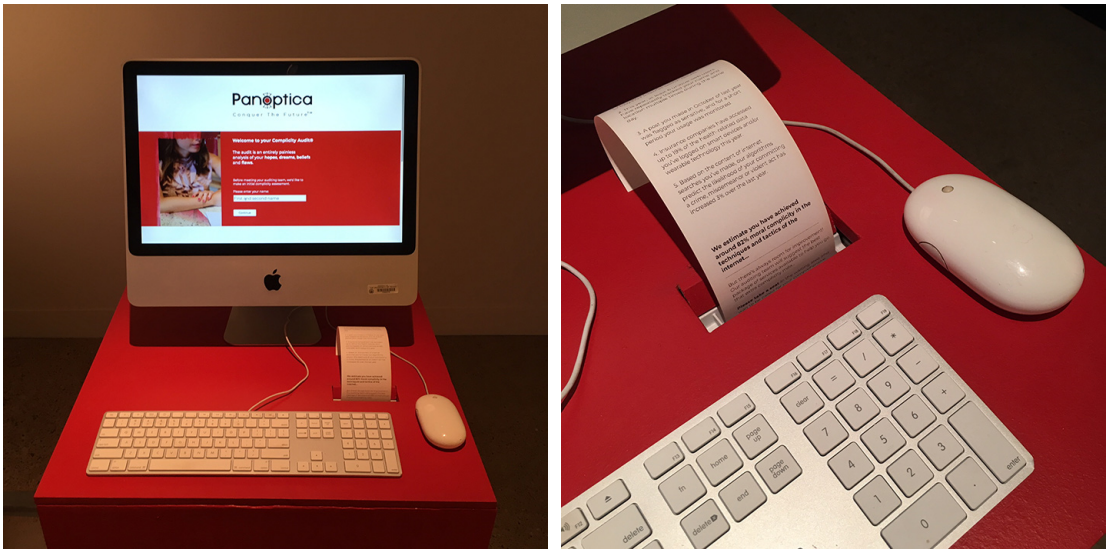


**Fig. 16: 'Panoptica' customer kiosk**

In the end, the kiosk was perhaps the most effective part of the installation experience, and I'm glad I took the time and effort to make it work convincingly, since it proved an immediate way for casual visitors into the space to get a sense of the ideas I was trying to get across. Using the interaction software *Axure*, I was able to create a web application which generated a ticket-like receipt showing any five out of some thirty data surveillance statements I had created, each of which incorporated a random numeric or text variable, such as:

> 1. The name [[input_name]] returns a total of [[n]] internet search results.
>
> 2. Ads based on purchases you've made on Amazon have appeared in your browser [[x]] time this month.


3. Social media posts you've made this year reveal your [[gender / race / age / income]] [[y]]% of the time.

4. You've been spotted on [[Ring / Nest / Arlo]] private smart security cameras [[z]] times this week.

5. [[Google / Amazon / Apple / Facebook]] knows more than you think about your [[age / income / family / beliefs / daily routine]].

Having spent a little bit of time researching existing online tools like *IntelTechniques.com* and *HaveIBeenPwned.com*, which demonstrate how easy it is to find simple biographical and personal data connected to a name, phone number or email address, I had hoped to create some sort of real-time search tool that would actually draw real data on a person's details from the web. For various reasons, this proved impractical, so instead, I changed the emphasis of the exercise into a more speculative experience: the results wouldn't be true per se, but they would be *plausible*, convincing enough to be potentially true.

**Fig. 17: 'Panoptica' complicity assessment printout**

I was struck by the number of people interacting with the printouts—including other design students, faculty, and friends of mine who work in technology—who either asked the question, 'is this real?', or took it on face value that it probably was. Of course, the point for me is not whether the printout paints a completely accurate picture of any one person's data vulnerabilities, but in the reminder how comprehensively this kind of data now exists in the public domain as a fundamental function of digital capitalism, to the point that we take it utterly for granted. The message here is entirely one that speaks to our complicity in such a system of logic: the vision of the world conveyed by the corporate credo of *Panoptica* is quite rightly, as one visitor to the space observed to me after her time there, "terrifying."

For just one person to offer such an assessment by way of response meant for me that the installation was a success. *Panoptica* is dystopian, yes; it is cheeky, even a little condescending in its tone, creating an implied authoritarian reproach against the user, inviting a suspension of disbelief. But it intends to, and I hope it does, deliver a sobering message about the death of privacy, which we're watching happen in front of our eyes. We are already forced, both with and without our consent, to make ourselves visible in the modern version of the world that's dictated by surveillance capitalism: for many of us, *Panoptica* is already here.

# CONCLUSION

While Shoshana Zuboff's seven-hundred word tome *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* is a vigorous new dissection of, and broadside at, the new "instrumentarian power" wielded by companies like Google, Facebook, and Microsoft, characterized as "an unprecedented form of capitalism" acting with the intent to "transform us into means to others' market ends," her analysis is not without its critics (352). Evgeny Morozov, writing in *The Baffler*, takes exception to the framing that Zuboff chooses, in weighting the horrors of surveillance over and above those of capitalism itself. "To view surveillance capitalism as our new invisible Leviathan is to miss how power, under capitalism, has been operating for several centuries," Morozov concludes, noting that Zuboff's allegiances, as a tenured professor at the Harvard Business School, necessarily lie in finding ways to absolve capitalism *per se* of such anti-human outcomes, laying them instead at the feet of what she believes is a simply a systemic misstep within the tech industry towards "behavior modification" ("Capitalism's New Clothes.").

This back-and-forth on the sources of our current crisis is a reminder that the roots of the forces that would disenfranchise us are deep—centuries long in their causes—and that radical problems require, if not radical forms of confrontation, at the very least radical *perspectives*. It's one of the reasons I've come to advocate for skepticism with my work, in repurposing those things that might be used against us into new, fertile forms of enfranchisement.

The first law of technology, according to the historian Melvin Kranzberg, states that "technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (547). Indeed, technologies of ease and convenience, even of automation, are of course not inherently 'evil' in

themselves: I use, and endorse, many of them myself. But one of the things I have come to conclude is that while the technologies themselves may not be acting against our interests, it's the fact that corporations keep such technologies opaque and proprietary—as intellectual copyrights to govern and direct as they deem profitable—that represents the most pernicious threat to our collective wellbeing. Some, like Morozov, argue for the 'socialization' of the data resources that are ostensibly used in our names, but held from us: it seems manifestly fair to suggest that we all deserve to benefit—and profit—collectively from the information technologies on offer, to otherwise return our agency back to us. Nevertheless, for those who are looking to redistribute how, and in whose hands, our data is held, "the true challenge… is to find a way to distribute power, not just data" ("There Is a Leftwing Way"). In other words, to look beyond the tools to grapple with the systems they represent.

*  *  *

My work does not, and never has, represented a 'traditional' design response to the problems I see in the world—perhaps because those problems are not necessarily simply design problems, but rather complex social and political phenomena which manifest in the objects and systems of the modern world.

One of the things that punk's message of possibility and agency taught me, which was to an extent borne out in the years of musical composition and performance that it inspired, is that there is at least a kind of autonomy in the voice of the creator. That voice necessarily exemplifies a form of agency, after all—whether singular or collective—as opposed to defaulting to a 'design by committee' mentality. We talk much of the idea of 'co-design' and 'human-centered' solutions—both of which are, of course, valid design

responses—but there are virtues to a subjective approach, and to the commitment to stick to a personal version of the truth: with such visions, it is always possible to spark responses and create impact, if they are dispatched in a focused way.

The true power of punk was not just in up-ending expectations, but also in *implementing* alternative visions of the way things could be: not just to speak to truth, but to *act* to truth, to reject how things are, by building new versions of those things. Punk didn't wait for affirmation from the establishment, for some kind of royal assent from social or historical modes. It self-organized a voice—as well as a community—of response to the status quo: it did not ask for permission to perform it.

And in this key area, I believe my work does act to retain, or even reclaim, some sort of agency, because it enacts my response to the problem by satirizing it, by broadcasting it, by responding with what the Situationists called *détournement*—a 'rerouting' of the intent of the technology back against itself. We can doff our caps to the intractability of these social, technological problems, respectfully deferring to the wisdom of the corporate innovators shaping society in their image, or we can poke holes in their ambitions and methods, by essentially problematizing them. In various ways, in multiple forms, and admittedly even with varying degree of success, my intention is to respond with a very simple, "no, thank you."

There is, of course, a bind that ties that hands of all those working in the fields of technology and counterculture, given that the tools available to us have already become easier than ever to weaponize, undermine and propagandize in the service of intractable power. I've demonstrated in my own analysis and responses to the problem that there's a struggle to find reliable sources of agency when, as James Bridle observes, power "is abstracted to the degree that it becomes both unassailable and almost invisible" (*ArtReview*). As Bridle argues, what's needed to confront these problems is not

necessarily new technologies, but new *narratives*. The "way to resist such power is to delve into both the given systems—technological, financial—and into excluded systems—magic, mythology, non-Western traditions—to gain literacy in them, so that those narratives can be rewritten, or overwritten" (*ArtReview*). The song; the zine; the gallery space; even the *détourné* corporate video: these are all forms of narrative I'm choosing to (re)write, all of them systems I aim to turn against themselves in the name of emancipation.

My view is that one of the most important things we can do is to provide *awareness*: to uncover, to educate, but also to provide visions of the alternatives, in as fleshed out, or purely confrontational forms as possible. Working responses involve teaching the tools, but also the *politics* of the tools: some forms of design *do*; others *show*. Carving out compelling forms of critique which achieve both, opening up the possibilities of a different future—or even of simply refusing the future—trigger a necessary starting point of agency in the individual, through which we can set out on the journey back to collective power.

At this point, it seems hard to predict if there is some new watershed moment of counterculture on the horizon, something akin to punk's Molotov Cocktail of ideas, energy, and sound, and that through it we will finally find a way to renounce capitalist realism.

In my work, at least, I'm proceeding *as if it were possible*.

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